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Die Masken aus der Nekropole von Lipari

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Die Masken aus der Nekropole von Lipari

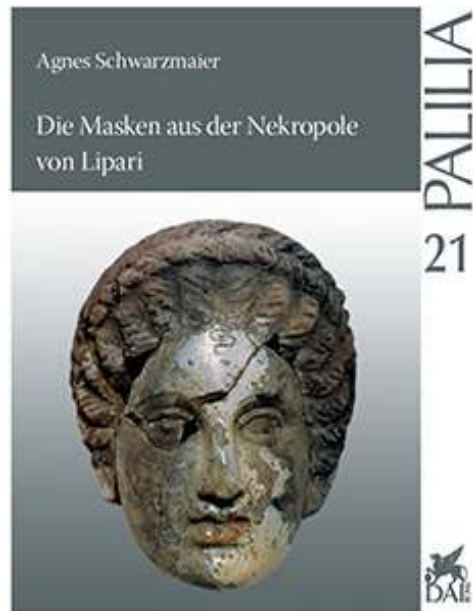
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Agnes Schwarzmaier, *Die Masken aus der Nekropole von Lipari*, *Palilia* 21, Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2011, 280 pages, 48 figs, 24 pls. (ISBN 9783895007101)

- 1 The text is organized in seven long chapters, followed by a list of the masks described in previously published studies (pp. 227-239) and a catalogue of those examples kept in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow. In fact, it is precisely from this appendix that one must begin in order to understand some of this book's most problematic aspects. It is the appendix that makes clear that the author analyzed directly only the fictile masks on display in the Museo Eoliano and the examples in the Kelvingrove Museum. Most of the artifacts were studied entirely on the basis of photographs and published descriptions. The author was unable to gain access to the rest of the archaeological material at the Museo Eoliano in order to check the possible existence of further still unpublished fragments and the descriptions made by Bernabò Brea. As we shall see, these limitations in the study of the existing archaeological evidence have important consequences for the work's methodology.
- 2 In the introduction it is pointed out that the book is based on a fresh reading of the funerary contexts described by Bernabò Brea and Cavalier in the *Meligunis Lipara* series, from which the author drew the material for a specially created database of the tombs with masks. The chronology of these burials derives from published information (p. 12), in some cases revised on the basis of more recent studies, although it is also pointed out that it was not possible to conduct a new and comprehensive analysis of all the ceramic materials associated with burials containing theatrical masks.
- 3 In the introduction, the author places her work in the broader context of studies on funerary archaeology. The study does reflect some of the more recent scholarly tendencies in the field, such as the strong interest in the complex and dynamic relationship between individual choices and the norms imposed by the social context. Specifically, the author recognizes the exemplary value of the study of terracottas from the necropolis of Taranto conducted by D. Graepler who identified the symbolic function of coroplastic artifacts and showed how they expressed the role of the individual within his or her social context by means of a shared system of signs. Schwarzmaier justly emphasizes (p. 15) the importance of a careful reading of the context and the depositional characteristics, in order to highlight the value of the objects as key indicators of ritual practices and religious beliefs. Following this methodological premise is a summary of the excavations and research on the necropolis of Lipari.
- 4 The second chapter is a key section of the work, since it tackles the chronology, classification, distribution, and interpretation of the individual types of fictile mask. It is both significant and praiseworthy that the author distances herself from the established tradition of studies that see the masks of Lipari as the colonial reflection of Attic theatre. In this view, such production is described as the direct illustration of



characters, myths and stories of the Attic comedies and tragedies that are known thanks to the literary evidence and the descriptions from the imperial era, including Pollux' *Onomastikon*. The author justifiably questions this Athenocentric perspective, which pervaded the work of Bernabò Brea and characterized the studies by A.D. Trendall and T.B.L. Webster as well, partly on the basis of more recent observations by R. Green and A. Seeberg. Schwarzmaier rightly stresses the significant distance between Attic plays and their figurative representation (characterized by their own symbolic code) and the profound differences between the socio-cultural context of Athens and that of Magna Graecia and Sicily, where only a few specific themes from the original plays were selected or taken up (pp. 26-29). The chronology, type, and interpretation of the individual masks proposed by Bernabò Brea are convincingly challenged and in many cases refuted.

- 5 The *pars construens* of the work tackles the typological seriation of the artifacts. According to the author, two main groupings can be recognized: the Classical, of the late 5th and 4th centuries, and the Hellenistic, which differs from the previous group in terms of dimensions, craft techniques, and formal characteristics of the masks (pp. 30-49). The book's analysis of the two groups does not proceed in a clear and consequential fashion with a systematic presentation of the distinctive types, series, and criteria used to categorize the archaeological material. Instead of setting out a coherent typological framework, the author unexpectedly begins describing individual cases: the mask of the old man from tomb 74, which Bernabò Brea had attributed to Priam; the youth from tomb 2184, for which similar examples are shown, together with variations in the hair, headgear, etc. The author admits that the "typology" presented (p. 30) is not a means of classifying and ordering the entire corpus of masks in Lipari but merely a presentation of the most representative masks. This non-systematic approach constitutes one of the book's most problematic aspects: the difficulty of establishing typological criteria and applying them therefore clearly depends, as the author points out, on the craft techniques by which these masks were made. Indeed, typical characteristics of this form of production include 1) the use of a very limited number of matrices for making the face, 2) the continuous modification of these matrices to accentuate/transform certain facial features, 3) the application of hand-crafted details (headgear, hair), designed to clarify the identity of the subject being represented, and 4) the essential contribution of color for specifying the gender. The same matrix could thus be used for a boy or a girl, changing the color of the complexion, and a few details of the hair, and the addition of horns and/or a beard can transform a male figure into a Pan or Acheloo.
- 6 While this ancient method for producing the masks (p. 35) undoubtedly makes typological classification more difficult due to the presence of many different versions and variants within each series, Schwarzmaier's approach further complicates the analysis. Indeed, for the author, the very concept of "type" seems to be of little use for the Lipari artifacts. She thus decides to speak of type only when the facial details and hairstyles of two masks are so similar as to make it clear that they represent the same subject. In this way, typology and interpretation are merged and confused. Thus for example, the same matrix can produce different types if used for a man and a woman (p. 35), while masks that show the same subject but were made with completely different matrices are gathered under the same type. This vague and inconsistent definition of type is compounded by the dramatic absence of an unequivocal naming system for the "types" themselves. Indeed, the author ignores the definitions provided

by Bernabò Brea on the basis of the lexicographer Pollux, such as Jocasta, Priam, Panchrestos, and Pornoboskos. Such names may well be of dubious value but are at least very clear. In contrast, Schwarzmaier's mask "types" are generically called "*bärtiger Greis*," "*bartloser Mann*," or "*Mädchen*." Since there exist a number of types of "old men," "beardless youths," "slaves," and "girls," readers find themselves completely disoriented and unable to connect these terms with any precise type of mask. This confusion can only get more problematic, since the text lacks adequate graphic documentation of these masks.

- 7 In short, it is clear that the fundamental problem lies in the author's inability to specify a typological classification worthy of the archaeological evidence – *i.e.* sufficiently flexible and elaborate so as to explain the complexity of the masks from Lipari. The only solution would have been to distinguish clearly between the purely morphological typology and the interpretation of the evidence. Of the two mentioned levels of analysis, however, the former is the fundamental one and necessarily must include the distinction into prototypes, types, series, variants, and versions on the basis of matrices and permutations of details added by hand. Such an approach reflects methods that have long been applied in the field¹. Autoptic examination of all the archaeological material would have thus made it possible to recognize the various generations of matrices and to reconstruct, at least in part, the complex relationships between the various series, in order to reconstruct more clearly the different stages of the productive process. As the author admits (p. 51), this would have been the only sure way of creating a seriation and a relative chronology that could be linked to the chronology provided by the contexts. Lastly, the author does not provide a table showing the various "types" recognized, their examples, and the chronology (even just the one proposed by Bernabò Brea) of the individual tombs where they were found, which would have been highly useful to readers. Overall, this first section of the second chapter (pp. 30-72) appears confusing, since the author mixes the description of the so-called "types" with the identification and interpretation of the subjects represented, the description of production strategies, the dating of the tombs, and the examination of the ceramics within the contexts of discovery.

- 8 More convincing is the iconographic analysis and the identification of represented subjects (pp. 73-83). There is a critique of Bernabò Brea's proposals, which were based essentially on the frequently questioned and rather unclear *Onomastikon* by Pollux. Numerous pages are dedicated to the crowns that are a feature of various masks from both the 4th and the 3rd centuries. Worth noting here is the type composed of a compact structure of flowers with ribbons at the sides, which can be associated with the world of the *symposion*. The identification of these *Symposionkränze* is one of the book's most interesting aspects and has important hermeneutic consequences (see below). Nevertheless, we cannot share the author's views in the following cases: 1) The crowns of some Hellenistic female heads (plate 11a) are hard to be understood as composed of ears of wheat. For this reason, the subjects cannot be identified with Demeter or Kore. Indeed, many scholars have questioned the traditional identification of the Sicilian protomai with Demeter or Kore². 2) The detail of the closed mouth cannot be used to identify the subjects of the female masks as divinities (p. 82), since this is also found in masks that represent symposiasts (plates 14-15) and grotesque figures (plates 6c, 21c). 3) The grotesque mask with a wolf's head is identified as Perseus basically because it is associated in tomb 1986 with a mask of Herakles with leonine headgear, thus forming a Perseus-Herakles pairing (pp. 81-82); however, the hermeneutic criterion of the

association of the types, already used by Bernabò Brea, is heavily criticized by Schwarzmaier herself (p. 38).

- 9 The third chapter emphasizes anew the uniqueness of these theatrical terracottas, which have no direct parallels in Athens, Attica, or even in Greece in general. The influence of Attic iconographic models is conceded for some of the Classical-era masks, such as the old grotesque figure with a pilos (pp. 86, 88, plate 6c). This attempt to detach the analysis of terracottas from Lipari from Athens represents a much-needed break with the long history of studies that are too biased towards Athenian theater. Despite these welcome observations, it must be noted that it is rather difficult to entirely dissociate the introduction of new types (such as the “young citizens” and “slaves”) in Lipari in the late 4th and early 3rd centuries from the development of the Middle and New Comedy in Athens in the course of the 4th century. The importance of developments in Athenian theater therefore cannot be completely denied, given their substantial and immediate echoes in other areas of the Greek world. The main difference between Lipari and other Greek contexts, rightly stressed by Schwarzmaier, is that in Athens theatrical masks constitute a subject for ceramics and sculptural reliefs and are even reproduced in rare statuettes but are mainly found in domestic and theatrical contexts and not in necropolises, as in the case of Lipari.
- 10 The fourth chapter tackles the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon, i.e. the presence and meaning of the masks found in only 5% of the tombs in Lipari. These artifacts are attested between the late 5th and the mid-3rd century BCE³, and Schwarzmaier rightly emphasizes the highly standardized nature of their depositional arrangements: the masks are found outside the inhumation tomb, on the south side (where the head of the deceased was), and often on the south-east corner, inside a large container, sometimes made of unbaked clay (above all, in the course of the 4th century BCE). The masks accompany a highly standardized set of pottery consisting of one to four little plates, sometimes a large plate, a skyphos or a kylix, a lamp, and an oinochoe. The number of the masks is also quite regular: from two to eight in 4th-century tombs and one or two in those of the 3rd century; in exceptional cases they may be found in association with other figurative terracottas. Prestige ceramics, sometimes figurative, especially alabastra, lekanides, and lebetes, are in contrast found inside the burials, together with mirrors, strigils, and rare metal objects. Besides inhumations, there are also tombs with the ashes of the deceased contained in transport amphorae, pithoi or stamnoi (in the 6th and 5th centuries), craters (from the late 5th century onwards) and containers made of perishable material (in the 3rd century). With both inhumations and incinerations, neither the set of ceramics described nor the masks present traces of burning, thus they were deposited after the burial of the urns or the sarcophagi.
- 11 The author then addresses the question of how to determine the gender and age of the deceased, based solely on an examination of the grave goods, because the osteological material was either not collected or is not preserved. The discussion focuses on some of the more representative cases. Unfortunately, the author does not provide a table summarizing the composition of the grave goods of the individual tombs and their attribution according to gender and age of the deceased. In Schwarzmaier’s view, in the Classical period the masks seem to be mainly associated with male burials in tombs characterized either by the absence of grave goods or the small quantity of materials. For the Hellenistic era, the author can identify masks in female tombs that are identified as such by the presence of lebetes gamikoi, alabastra, and mirrors. There are

also masks in infants' tombs. The overall picture of the contexts therefore seems to reflect the existence of precise ritual norms. What is missing, however, is a diachronic analysis of the tombs with masks within the topographical context that considers their relationship to the various clusters in the necropolis. Regarding the composition of the grave goods, the presence of strigils in tombs does not in itself constitute a sufficient reason for assuming that the deceased were male (p. 126). It should be rather read in relation to practices aimed at caring for the body that ensured the birth of healthy children⁴.

- 12 In addition, Schwarzmaier stresses the discovery of theatrical masks in "votive pits and middens" as well (pp. 138-155). She describes some of the cases discussed by Bernabò Brea, asserting that they should all be attributed to the first half of the 3rd century. Although the differences between the various contexts advise against a single interpretation of the phenomenon, Schwarzmaier suggests that these pits contain the remains, in a secondary position, of objects burned elsewhere, such as residues of food, ceramics used for the consumption of food, figurative terracottas and masks (pp. 142-143). According to the author, the different composition of these deposits with respect to the burials thus indicates that the pits contain the remains of specific collective rites, such as communal meals performed on a limited number of occasions within a very narrow chronological horizon.
- 13 In the chapter's concluding observations (pp. 172-183), Schwarzmaier attempts to re-contextualize the archaeological material from Lipari with regard to the complex phenomenon of funerary rites documented in the literary and epigraphic sources. More specifically, the author focuses on the various forms of funerary banquet, distinguishing between ceremonies with meals held at the house of the deceased and those held near the tomb at set intervals, such as the third, ninth, and thirtieth day, cited above all by Athenian authors. With respect to the *Beigabepakete* found among the tombs of Lipari, the *Kerameikos* of Athens has yielded quite different archaeological evidence. In the latter case, the pits were used for the burning of food scraps, especially the bones of animals, along with plates, cooking pots, and other ceramic vessels (characterized by their small dimensions) used for the consumption of drinks, suggesting that these meals had an essentially symbolic function. In the case of Lipari, Schwarzmaier points out that the ritual use of the objects and their deposition took place immediately after the burial of the body or the ashes. There was no burning of the artifacts, while the ceramic material, apparently used for consumption by a single individual, plausibly belonged to the deceased.
- 14 In chapter Five, Schwarzmaier discusses ceramic production in Magna Graecia and Sicily in order to understand the meaning of the theatrical masks. The author recognizes a large variety of iconographies, above all derived from Italic and Sicilian contexts, in which the masks are associated with Dionysos, satyrs and maenads depicted in generic Dionysian scenes. In such scenes, masks hanging from garlands or placed on the ground seem to be a recurring feature. Given the absence of other explicit references to the theater, the masks should not be seen as allusions to dramatic performances but as "*Schmuck von Räumen für abendlichen Trinkfeste*", i.e. as a symbolic cipher of the world of the banquet. Schwarzmaier's compelling analysis is, however, conducted in a rather imprecise manner: there is little specific attention to the evidence from Lipari and above all, the approach neglects the function of the analyzed pottery in its original context.

- 15 In chapter Six, Schwarzmaier seeks to combine the various lines of argumentation presented in the previous chapters into a single framework. She reconstructs a funerary ceremony in the form of a banquet that took place immediately after the burial and was addressing the deceased as a virtual participant in the symposion, for whom the ceremonial furnishings and the masks were intended. The masks were not used but perceived as symbolic elements that should have evoked a Dionysian atmosphere (*“Requisiten des Festes und Kultsymbole”*), which was also recalled by the craters used as urns for the ashes of the deceased. In the context of the symbolic banquets, the re-creation or evocation of a festive Dionysian environment appears to have derived from the role of Dionysos in beliefs about the afterlife: the god was seen as a liberator and the guarantor of a joyful destiny that was visualized in the image of the banquet. This interpretation, which separates the masks from the theatrical sphere and associates them with Dionysian funerary symbolism, is accompanied by some – rather dubious – observations: For example, the purported link between this set of rites, as reconstructed by Schwarzmaier, and Persephone and Demeter (pp. 206-207, 209) is unjustifiable in terms of the archaeological record. The generic references to Orphic beliefs and the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter reflect an uncritical dependence on the topoi of the archaeological literature. On the other hand, the author rather convincingly rejects the notion that these ceremonies had an initiatory or mystic dimension. In conclusion, despite the numerous comparisons with the literary and archaeological evidence on Dionysian beliefs in Magna Graecia and Sicily, the eschatological implications of these funerary practices are hard to discern, as Schwarzmaier herself admits (p. 222). Instead, one should stress the great evocative power attributed to the masks by their ancient users: modest objects, made in series from clay, that were, nevertheless, sufficient to set off a complex chain of symbolic associations, linking the burial to a composite framework of beliefs and hopes, as well as enhancing the meaning of the ritual banquet in which the dialogue between the deceased and their families continued.
- 16 In conclusion, Schwarzmaier’s book offers numerous interesting points, despite the occasionally non-linear and cumbersome presentation of the topics. In this regard, the break with Bernabò Brea’s Athenocentric perspective constitutes one of its most important achievements; however, the typology that Schwarzmaier proposes is not satisfactory, and a systematic study of the archaeological material in accordance with criteria set by current coroplastic studies is required. Definitely more successful is the second part of the work, which demonstrates a strong interest in the symbolic functions of the objects and, broadly speaking, contextual archaeology. Particularly worthy of attention in this regard is the proposed separation of the masks from the sphere of the theater and their recognition as a generic symbolic cipher designed to evoke the rite of the funeral banquet in a Dionysian sense. Put simply, this book constitutes a useful attempt at providing a new reading of old excavations and offers useful starting points for new and more detailed research into one of the most interesting types of Sicilian coroplastic art.

NOTES

1. See, for example, A. Muller, "Description et analyse des productions moulées. Proposition de lexique multilingue, suggestions de méthode," in A. Muller (ed.), *Le moulage en terre cuite dans l'antiquité: création et production dérivée, fabrication et diffusion*, Lille 1997, pp. 437-463.
 2. See, for example, T. ISMAELLI, *Archeologia del culto a Gela*, Bari, 2011, esp. pp. 219-222.
 3. L. BERNABÒ BREA, *Meligunis Lipara 11. Gli scavi nella necropoli greca e romana di Lipari nell'area del terreno vescovile*, Lipari, 2001.
 4. See, for example, F. COLIVICCHI, "Lo specchio e lo strigile. Scambio di simboli e scambio fra i sessi", in F.H.M. MASSA-PAIRAULT (ed.), *L'image antique et son interprétation*, Rome 2006, pp. 277-300.
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ABSTRACTS

The book, a reworking of the author's *Habilitationsschrift* discussed at the Freie Universität of Berlin, tackles the complex phenomenon of votive offerings in the form of terracotta masks from the Classical and Hellenistic necropolis of Lipari. This important category of archaeological material has been the object of various well-known studies, most notably by L. Bernabò Brea and M. Cavalier. It is one of the most important classes of coroplastic art from Magna Graecia and Sicily because of not only its quality and variety but also its fundamental contribution to our knowledge of local ritual practices, funerary customs, and religious beliefs in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE.

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